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MULTI-PROGRAM TROLLEYS AND SWITCHES

[0001] This application claims priority to U.S. Provisional Application No. 60/391,791, filed June 26, 2002, entitled " MULTI-PROGRAM TROLLEYS AND SWITCHES"

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

1. Field of the Invention.

[0002] The present invention relates to operable wall systems used to partition larger rooms into smaller rooms and particularly to a track and trolley system wherein the trolleys can be programmed to automatically switch panels to form a desired room layout.

2. Description of the Related Art.

[0003] Operable wall panel systems, also known as movable wall panel systems, are often used to temporarily subdivide large rooms into smaller rooms such as in convention halls, hotels, and the like. These systems typically include an overhead track and trolley suspension system whereby wall panels are moved along the track from a storage area to a wall forming position in the space being subdivided. The track may include a number of switches where turns and/or intersections are provided for moving the wall panels.

[0004] One difficulty in subdividing an area arises when several wall panels must be moved from a storage area through multiple intersecting track segments to a specific location to form a desired room arrangement. In many instances, each individual panel has a pre-designated position in the final room layout. This is particularly important where the subdivided room arrangement has rooms where the walls are of different colors or differing surface textures which may require some of the panels to have differing features on opposite sides. In these situations, improper placement of the panels could result in mismatches in the final room layout. Previously, the process of subdividing a large space was quite time-consuming requiring that panel placement be closely monitored to achieve the desired result.

[0005] In order to facilitate the process of directing panels to a pre-determined position, guide plates have been mounted on the track intersections and used to cooperate with diverter elements mounted on the panel trolleys. In operation, the guide plates on the track intersection engage the diverter elements on the wall panel trolleys to direct the wall panel on to the proper track. One such prior design is described in U.S. Patent Application Serial Number 09/706,041 filed November 3, 2000 and which is assigned to the assignee of the present invention.

[0006] In some designs, trolleys have been equipped with diverter elements that extend above the trolley wheels to engage a diverter plate mounted on the under side of a top plate of the track switch in combination with additional diverter elements mounted to a plate laterally extending from the trolley below the wheels, that engage diverter plates mounted to the underside of the bottom plate of the track switch.

[0007] One shortcoming in these prior designs is in the number of trolley and track switch combinations required to subdivide a large area.

[0008] In another type of movable wall system, electric switching stations are used to direct or switch wall panels to their appropriate track. The switching station includes a rotatable platter mounted at the intersection of multiple tracks. The platter is electrically operated to rotate between multiple positions connecting different track sections together at each position. One disadvantage of this system is that although it allows numerous track sections to be selectively interconnected to move the wall panels down their proper paths, a person is required to control the movement of the platter. The electric switching systems are also relatively expensive.

[0009] What is needed is a programmable trolley and track system that automatically directs individual wall panels to a pre-determined position in a layout without an excessive number of switch and trolley designs.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0010] The present invention provides a multi programmed track switch and trolley system that automatically routes wall panels between intersecting tracks to a pre-determined or pre-programmed wall-forming position. The track switch section includes selectively positioned guide plates on the upper interior wall of the track switch section. The guide plates engage diverter elements positioned on the trolley to direct wall panels on a particular path through the switch section. Each trolley includes an elongated diverter element or blade laterally displaced from the trolley centerline. The lateral displacement of the diverter blades is variable so as to engage selected guide plates on the track switch sections. The diverter blades are also variable in height to engage or not engage certain guide plates.

[0011] In addition, the trailing trolleys also include one or more centrally mounted diverter pins which are also variable both in height and lateral displacement relative to the trolley centerline. Through the selection of diverter blade and diverter pin arrangements, trolleys can be paired forming multiple combinations from a set of basic trolley designs.

[0012] The present invention accomplishes a primary objective of providing a track switch and trolley system that automatically routes individual wall panels of an operable wall system to a pre-determined wall forming location to compartmentalize a large room into smaller rooms without the need for an excessive number of individual trolley and switch designs.

[0013] The invention accomplishes a further objective of providing a switching system that is automatic, and without the need for human intervention.

[0014] The invention accomplishes a still further objective of providing a switching system wherein a basic set of trolley and track switch designs can be combined to form a variety of room layouts.

[0015] The invention accomplishes still another objective of providing a cost effective switching system not requiring electrical power.

[0016] The invention accomplishes a still further objective of providing a switching system that permits all of the wall panels to be stored in one track storage section without the need for offset switches or flapper panels.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0017] The above mentioned and other advantages and objects of this invention, and the manner of obtaining them, will become more apparent and the invention itself will be better understood by reference to the following descriptions of embodiments of the invention taken in conjunction with the accompanying drawings, wherein:

[0018] Figure 1 is a diagrammatic top view of an operable wall system using a trolley and track switching system according to the present invention;

[0019] Figure 2 is a diagrammatic perspective view of the operable wall system of Figure 1;

[0020] Figure 3 is a partial diagrammatic top view of the operable wall system of Figure 1 wherein the track and track switch sections are shown in additional detail;

[0021] Figure 4 is a front view of a lead trolley equipped with a side diverter element in the outermost lateral position for the track switching system of the present invention;

[0022] Figure 5 is a right side view of the trolley of Figure 4;

[0023] Figure 6 is a front view of a trailing trolley equipped with a side diverter element in the outermost lateral position for the track switching system of the present invention;

[0024] Figure 7 is a right side view of the trolley of Figure 6;

[0025] Figure 8 is a front view of a lead trolley equipped with a side diverter element in an intermediate lateral position for the track switching system of the present invention;

[0026] Figure 9 is a front view of a trailing trolley equipped with a side diverter element in an intermediate lateral position for the track switching system of the present invention;

[0027] Figure 10 is a front view of a lead trolley equipped with a side diverter element in the innermost lateral position for the track switching system of the present invention;

[0028] Figure 11 is a front view of a trailing trolley equipped with a side diverter element in the innermost lateral position for the track switching system of the present invention;

[0029] Figure 12 is a top view of a switch assembly from Figure 2, shown removed from the remainder of the track, which serves to direct trailing trolleys to their proper track sections during wall panel stacking;

[0030] Figure 13 is a front view , taken along line 13-13 in Figure 12, of the switch assembly of Figure 12;

[0031] Figure 14 is a top view of a switch assembly from Figure 2, shown removed from the remainder of the track, which serves to direct lead trolleys to their proper track sections during wall panel stacking;

[0032] Figure 15 is a front view , taken along line 15-15 in Figure 14, of the switch assembly of Figure 14;

[0033] Figures 16-21 are front views showing the lead and trailing trolleys of Figures 4-11 entering the switch assembly of Figure 15;

[0034] Figure 22 is a top view of a first switch assembly from Figure 2, shown removed from the remainder of the track, which serves to direct trolleys to the proper intersecting track sections during movement of the suspended panels in a wall forming direction;

[0035] Figure 23 is a rear view, taken along line 23-23 in Figure 22 of the switch assembly of Figure 22;

[0036] Figure 24 is a top view of another switch assembly from Figure 2, shown removed from the remainder of the track, which serves to direct trolleys to the proper intersecting track sections during movement of the suspended panels in a wall forming direction;

[0037] Figure 25 is a rear view, taken along line 25-25 in Figure 24 of the switch assembly of Figure 24.

[0038] Corresponding reference characters indicate corresponding parts throughout the several views. Although the drawings represent embodiments of the invention, the drawings are not necessarily to scale and certain features may be exaggerated or omitted in order to better illustrate and explain the present invention.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

[0039] For the purposes of promoting an understanding of the principles of the invention, reference will now be made to the embodiments illustrated in the drawings and specific language will be used to describe the same. It will nevertheless be understood that no limitation of the scope of the invention is thereby intended. The invention includes any alterations and further modifications in the illustrated devices and described methods and further applications of the principles of the invention which would normally occur to one skilled in the art to which the invention relates.

[0040] Referring now to **FIGS. 1** and **2**, there is diagrammatically shown a top view and a perspective view of a movable wall panel system including an automatic track switching system of the present invention. The movable wall panel system serves to selectively compartmentalize a single, large room **20** into smaller rooms or areas. The operable wall includes a multitude of panels that extend from the floor to the ceiling of room **20**, which panels are shown in **FIG. 1** in dashed lines at **22** in a stacked or storage position within a housing abstractly indicated at **24**. In **FIG. 2**, one of the panels **22** is shown being moved to a wall-forming location. Although shown as being within room **20**, housing **24** typically is located directly adjacent to and outward of a side wall of room **20** as a specially designed pocket room. Wall panels **22** may be of any conventional construction. None of the panels **22** are hinged to adjacent panels in the inventive panel system, as the track switching system of the present invention uses panels that are each separately movable along the track between an operational, wall-forming position and a storage position.

[0041] Panels **22** are movable along track segments mounted in the ceiling which form intersecting track sections **26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31** and **32**. Track sections **26-32** are designed such that when panels **22** are all in their wall-forming positions, room **20** is compartmentalized into six smaller rooms or areas **35, 36, 37, 38, 39** and **40**. This track

configuration is merely illustrative and not intended to be limiting as the inventive track switching system may be employed with more complicated or less complicated tracks, including intersecting tracks that serve to compartmentalize a room into different numbers of smaller room or differently shaped rooms. In addition, the shown track configuration can be used in an even larger room than room **20**, which larger room is equipped with one or more additional operable wall panel systems that are similar to the shown system and which form walls in alignment with the walls formed by the shown wall panel system to provide suitable room compartmentalization.

[0042] Referring now to **FIG. 3**, portions of the operable wall of **FIG. 1** are shown in a top view. Track sections **26-32** are of a conventional design suitable for use with the type of trolley employed with the panels. As described below, different types of trolleys may be used within the scope of the invention, and the track construction will be changed in a corresponding fashion to provide proper a suitable track and trolley combination. In the illustrated embodiment, track sections **26-32** are made of steel beams which are generally square in vertical cross-section. The wheels of the trolley ride along the bottom wall of the track section, and a slot centered in that bottom wall which extends longitudinally along the track section length permits passage of the pendant trolley bolt that attaches to the top of a panel **22**. Track sections **26-32** are mounted to the ceiling support structure by means of hanger brackets of conventional design, generally shown at **44**, positioned at spaced intervals along the lengths of the track sections.

[0043] A switch assembly, generally designated **50**, serves as an intersecting track section for track sections **26-29** and is operably connected to each of track sections **26-29**. Switch assembly **50** is mounted to the ceiling support structure and, as described further below, is designed to cooperate with diverter element mounted on the panel trolleys to direct panels being moved along track section **26** in a wall-forming direction into one of track sections **27, 28** and **29**. Another switch assembly, generally designated **60**, serves as the intersection of track sections **29-32** to which it is operably connected. Switch assembly **60** also is mounted to the ceiling support structure and is designed to cooperate with diverter elements mounted

on the panel trolleys to direct panels being moved along track section **29** in a wall-forming direction into one of track sections **30, 31** and **32**.

[0044] The stacking of panels **22** within housing **24** is achieved through the use of switch assemblies **70** and **80** that are interconnected by track segment **72** and which are mounted to the ceiling support structure. Switch assembly **70** is operably connected to track section **26**, as well as to panel stacking track segments **73** and **74** mounted to the ceiling support structure by hanger brackets **44**. Switch assembly **80** is connected to panel stacking track segments **75** and **76** mounted to the ceiling support structure by hanger brackets **44**.

[0045] Panels **22** are stacked along track segments **73-76** when stored within housing **24**. The length of track segments **73-76** is a function of the number of panels to be stacked, which in turn is a function of the length of the walls formed by the panels when moved to their wall-forming positions. In **FIG. 3**, only six panels are shown to facilitate illustration, and these panels are designated as **22a, 22b, 22c, 22d, 22e** and **22f**. Each of these panels represent multiple panels of a similar type, with the types being distinguished herein based solely on the configuration of their trolleys. Specifically, and while the panels may otherwise be similar in most respects, as described below the trolleys of panel type **22a** differ from the trolleys of panel type **22b-f**, which in turn have trolleys that differ from each other. When the operable wall is fully extended, panels of the type **22a** are aligned along the entire length of track section **30**, panels of the type **22b** are aligned along the entire length of track section **31**, panels of the type **22c** are aligned along the entire length of track section **27**, panels of the type **22d** are aligned along the entire length of track section **28**, and panels of the type **22e** and **22f** are aligned along the entire length of track sections **26, 29** and **32**. Naturally, the number of panels each of panels **22a, 22b, 22c, 22c, 22e** and **22f** represents can differ as it is dependent upon the length of the walls being formed, and it is not material to the present invention.

[0046] Each of panels **22** is suspended from the track system by two trolleys, namely a lead trolley and a trailing trolley, positioned proximate opposite ends of that panel. As used

herein, lead and trailing are referenced with respect to the trolley position during movement of the panels from a stacked position to a wall-forming position. The lead or front trolleys of panels **22a, 22b, 22c, 22d, 22e** and **22f**, when such panels are stacked, are disposed along track segments **73** and **74**, and the trailing or back trolleys of the panels when stacked are disposed along track segment **75** and **76**. For example, and with reference to stacked panel **22e**, a lead trolley generally represented at **82** suspends the panel from track section **73**, and a trailing trolley generally represented at **83** suspends the panel from track section **75**.

[0047] The automatic track switching system of the present invention employs switch or diverter elements mounted to the trolleys of panel **22**. The overall form of the trolleys to which such diverter elements are attached may be selected from one of the many known designs. As a result, the term trolley is used generally herein, and is intended to encompass devices, including wheeled carriage and carriers, of all types that are operably connected to and movable along various tracks.

[0048] The trolleys used with panel types **22a** through 22**f** differ only in the configuration of their diverter elements. Each lead and trailing trolley includes a side diverter element. The diverter blades on the side diverter elements are located at one of three different lateral positions relative to and on each side of the trolley center line. In addition to the side diverter elements, each trailing trolley and only the trailing trolleys also includes a center diverter element. Center diverter elements are not used on the lead trolleys.

[0049] In the description that follows only the trolleys for use with panel types **22a**, **22c**, and **22e** will be described. Trolleys with these panels will include side diverter elements positioned to the right of the trolley centerline from the perspective of a person in **Fig. 3** standing at switch **50** and looking to the left toward housing **24.** Each trolley described will have a counterpart for use with panel types **22b**, **22d** or **22f** wherein the only difference is that the side diverter element is positioned to the left of the trolley centerline.

[0050] One suitable lead trolley design for use with panel type **22e** is shown in **Figs. 4** and **5** and is generally represented at **100**. Trolley **100** includes a U-shaped carrier channel **102**

having a base or web portion **103** and a pair of opposite upstanding sidewall portions **104**. A pendent bolt fitting **116** downwardly extends from the lower surface from the base portion **103**. The fitting **116** is internally threaded to receive a pendant trolley bolt **118** which is secured to the top section of a movable wall panel abstractly shown at **101**. Sidewall portions **104** defines bores **108** through which axles **110** are received. Four trolley wheel assemblies **112** are rotatably mounted on the axles **110** extending through sidewall portions **104** and wheel spacers **114**. Wheel assemblies **112** rollingly engage the various tracks for moving wall panel **101**. Guide rollers **120** extend into the track slot and serve to reduce friction between the trolley **100** and the slot. Guide rollers **120** are rotatably mounted on pivot posts **122** which are attached to the channel base portion **103** by any suitable means several of which are known in the art.

[0051] The trolley **100** is equipped with a side diverter element **124** that cooperates with guide plates mounted on the inside of the upper surface of the track switch sections to route the panel through the switch. The diverter element **124** is displaced laterally or perpendicular from the trolley centerline in the direction of the motion of the trolley along the track. The diverter element **124** includes a blade portion **125** that extends above the trolley wheels **112** and a body portion **126** that fixedly attached such as by welding to the carrier sidewall portion **104** between the wheel assemblies **112**.

[0052] With reference to **Figs. 6** and **7**, there is shown is a trailing trolley **130** that could be paired with trolley **100** of **Figs. 4** and **5** for use on panel type **22e**. The trolley **130** includes a center diverter element **134** in the form of a pair of pins **132** projecting vertically upward from a base plate **136** that is fixedly attached to the upper portion of carrier side walls **104**. Rather than the pin shown, a diverter element in the form of a rigid plate or blade may be used on the center diverter **134**. The trailing trolley **130** also includes a side diverter element **138** having a diverter blade **139** at the same lateral displacement from the trolley centerline as diverter blade **125** on trolley **100**. Side diverter element **138** also includes a body portion **140** which is fixedly attached to carrier sidewall portion **104**. Diverter blade **139** of trolley **130** is shorter in length than diverter blade **125** of lead trolley **100**. Based on these

differences in diverter blade length along with the presence of a center diverter **132** on trailing trolley **130,** the lead and trailing trolleys **100** and **130** respectively can be routed differently through a given switch section.

[0053] **Figs. 8** and **9** show lead and trailing trolleys that can be used on panel type **22c.** Lead trolley **150** in **Fig. 8** includes a U-shaped carrier channel **152** having a base or web portion **153** and upstanding sidewalls **154.** A side diverter element in the form of a diverter blade **158** extends vertically upward from carrier channels sidewall **154**. The diverter blade **158** may be fixedly attached to sidewall portion **154**, such as by welding. Alternatively, the diverter blade may be integrally formed with channel sidewall **154**. As with the previous trolleys, diverter blade **158** functions to engage complimentary guide plates provided on the track switch section. As a lead trolley, trolley **150** includes no center diverter.

[0054] In **Fig. 9**, trailing trolley **160** for panel type **22c** is shown. As a trailing trolley, trolley **160** includes a center diverter element **162** which includes a pair of diverter pins **163** extending vertically upward from a base plate **164** that is fixedly attached such as by welding to carrier channel sidewall portions **154**. A side diverter blade **166** extends vertically upward from carrier sidewall portion **154** as shown. As in the previously described lead and trailing trolley pair, side diverter blade **166** of trailing trolley **160** is shorter in height than diverter blade **158** of lead trolley **150**.

[0055] With reference now to **Fig. 10**, there is shown a lead trolley **170** for use with panel type **22a**. Trolley **170** includes a U-shaped carrier channel **172** having a base or web portion **173** and upstanding sidewall portions **174**. Trolley **170** includes a side diverter element **176** positioned inwardly from carrier sidewall portion **174**. Diverter element **176** includes a body portion **178** that is preferably fixedly attached such as by welding to the inside of sidewall **174** between axle pairs **110**. Diverter blade **177** extends vertically upward from the body portion **178**.

[0056] A trailing trolley suitable for use with panel type **22a** is generally represented at **180** in **Fig. 11**. Similar to lead trolley **170**, trailing trolley **180** includes a side diverter element

186 that includes a body portion **188** fixedly attached to the inside of sidewall **174** and having a vertically extending diverter blade **187** which is shorter in height that diverter blade **177** of the lead trolley **170**. As a trailing trolley, trolley **180** includes a center diverter element **190** that includes a pair of diverter pins **192** that extend vertically upward from a base plate **193**. Base plate **193** is fixedly attached at one side to body portion **188** of side diverter element **186**. The other side of base plate **193** is fixedly attached to the opposite carrier channel side wall **174**. Side diverter blades **177** and **187** of trolleys **170** and **180** respectively represent the most laterally inward of the side diverter blade positions.

[0057] The switch assemblies particularly designed for use in conjunction with the panel suspending trolleys of **Figs. 4-11** are shown in greater detail in **Figs. 12-25**. With reference now to **FIGS 12** and **13**, the switch assembly **80** that during wall stacking cooperates with the trolley diverter elements to route the trailing trolleys to their proper track sections is shown in top view and front view, respectively. In the illustrated embodiment, switch assembly **80** is formed from a single top plate **240** and three bottom plate sections **242**, **243** and **244**. Top plate **240** is suspended from a support structure with conventional fasteners in order to mount switch assembly **80** in the ceiling of room **20**. Plate sections 242-244 are each connected to top plate **240** in a vertical spaced-apart relationship in a well-known manner with a plurality of bolt and nut type fasteners that extend through tubular steel spacers **246** sandwiched between the various switch plates. The portions of these plate-connecting fastener assemblies that lie above the upper surface of top plate **240** are not shown in **Fig. 12** for purposes of illustration.

[0058] Plate sections **243** and **244** are horizontally spaced apart to provide a track path **248** into which enter trolleys being routed into switch assembly **80** in a panel stacking direction. Plate sections **242** and **243**, and plate sections **244** and **242**, are horizontally spaced apart to provide arcuate track paths or slots **249** and **250**, respectively. Track paths **248**, **249** and **250**, which provide the spaces through which extend the pendant bolts of the trolleys when the trolleys move or roll along the upper surface of plate sections **242-244**, are aligned with the track paths of track sections **72**, **76** and **75**, respectively.

[0059] Diverters or guides used to selectively route trolleys passing along track path **248** into either track path **249** or **250** include a series of elongate plates mounted on either side of track path **248**. As shown in **Fig. 12**, three elongate and arcuate guide plates **255**,**256** and **257** are fixedly attached, such as by welding to :the underside of the top plate **240** proximate and left of track path **248**. Guide plates **255-257** are evenly horizontally spaced to provide channels **259** and **260**. Three elongate, arcuate guide plates **262**, **263** and **264** are similarly attached to the underside of top plate section **240** right of track path **248** to provide channels **266** and **267**. The ends of the guide plates are pointed to aid in routing diverter blades into the appropriate channel or space as described further below.

[0060] Referring to **Fig. 13**, in conjunction with the height of the diverter blades of the side diverters of the trolleys, each of guide plates **255-257** and **262-264** are made sufficiently tall so as to project down from the top plate to a height at least slightly below the tops of the upstanding blades of the side diverter elements of the trailing trolleys. As so configured, the diverter blades must either enter one of the channels **259**,**260**, **266** and **267**, or enter the spaces laterally outward of guide plates **255** and **264**, when the trolleys pass along track path 248. Specifically, when the trailing trolleys shown in **Figs. 6, 9,** and **11** are separately routed through track path **248** in a wall-stacking direction, diverter blade **139** passes along the outer side of guide plate **264**, diverter blade **166** moves within channel **267**, and diverter blade **187** moves within channel **266**, thereby routing these trolleys into track path **250**.

[0061] Although guide plates **255-257** and **262-264** are shown as having the same height, guide plates **255-257** and **262-264** could all be of different heights, so long as each. plate is sufficiently tall so as to engage the appropriate trolley diverter blades during use.

[0062] With reference now to **Figs. 14** and **15**, the switch assembly **70** that during wall stacking cooperates with the trolley diverter elements to route the lead and trailing trolleys to their proper track sections is shown in top view and front view, respectively. In the illustrated embodiment, switch assembly **70** is formed from a single top plate 270, mounted in the room ceiling, and four bottom plate sections **272**, **273**, **274** and **275**. Bottom plate

sections **272-275** are each. connected to top plate **270** in a vertical spaced-apart relationship via spacing fasteners indicated at **280**.

[0063] Bottom plate sections **274** and **275** are horizontally spaced apart to provide a track path **282** into which enter trolleys being routed in a panel stacking direction. Plate sections **273** and **275**, and plate sections **272** and **274**, are horizontally spaced apart to provide arcuate track paths **283** and **284**, respectively, in communication with track path **282**. Plate sections **272** and **273** are horizontally spaced apart to provide a linear track path **285** in communication and aligned with track path 282. Track paths **282**, **283**, **284** and **285** are aligned with the track paths of track sections **26**, **73**, **74** and **72**, respectively.

[0064] In order to maintain the downstream ends of track paths **283** and **284** in alignment with each other while at the same time, having the upstream ends of these track paths be staggered along the track path **282** to avoid relatively large gaps between the bottom plates, arcuate paths **283** and **284** are formed with different radiuses. One suitable radius for the tighter turn for the trolley is about eight inches, while a suitable radius for the more gentle turn can be about twelve inches. Other radiuses of curvature for either turn of the illustrated switch assembly, such as 16, or 20, or 24 inches and preferably greater than eight inches, may be employed. Different trolleys may allow use of still different radiuses of curvature, including larger and smaller radii.

[0065] Guides used to selectively route lead trolleys passing along track path **282** into either track path **283** or **284** include a series of plates mounted to the underside of top plate **270** on either side of track path **282**. Arcuate guide plates **290**, **291**, and straight guide plate **292** are fixedly attached to the underside of top plate section **270** left of track path **282** to form channels **294** and **295**. Two arcuate guide plates **298** and **299** and straight guide plate **297** are similarly attached to the underside of top plate **270** right of track path **282** to provide channels **301** and **302**. Each of guide plates **290-291** and **298-299** is shorter than guide plates **255-257** and **262-264** of switch assembly **80**. Specifically, guide plates **290-291** and **298-299** are made sufficiently tall so as to project down to a height slightly below the tops of the

upstanding blades of the side diverter elements of the lead trolleys, but not so tall as to extend below the tops of the shorter blades of the side diverter elements of the trailing trolleys. As a result, during operable wall stacking when the trolleys are passed through track path **282**, while the diverter pins of the trailing trolleys do not engage guide plates **290-291** and **298-299** so that these guide plates do not interfere with the motion of the trailing trolleys, the diverter blades of the lead trolleys are guided by these plates. Diverter blade **125** passes along the outer side of guide plate **299**, diverter blade **158** moves within channel **302**, and diverter blade **177** moves within channel **301**, thereby routing the trolleys of **Figs. 4**, **8**, and **10** into track path **283**.

[0066] In order to ensure the trailing trolleys, being moved in a stacking direction through track path **282** continue into track path **285** and not track paths **283** and **284**, straight guide plates **292** and **297** define a channel **305** into which the center diverter of each of the trailing trolleys of **Figs. 6**, **9**, and **11** upwardly extends.

[0067] Lead trolleys **100**, **150**, and **170** are depicted entering switch assembly **70** in **Figs. 16**, **18**, and **20** respectively. The side diverter blades of these trolleys operatively engage guide plates **297-299**. Trailing trolleys **130**, **160**, and **180** are depicted entering switch assembly **70** in **Figs. 17**, **19**, and **21** respectively. With these trolleys, only the center diverter operatively engages guide plates **292** and **297**.

[0068] With reference now to **Figs. 22** and **23**, the switch assembly **50** that during wall extension cooperates with the upstanding blades of the side diverter elements of the trolleys to route the trolleys to their proper track sections is shown in top view and rear view, respectively. Switch assembly **50** is formed from a single top plate **310**, mounted in the room ceiling, and four bottom plate sections **312**, **313**, **314** and **315**. Bottom plate sections **312-315** are each connected to top plate **310** in a vertical spaced-apart relationship by spacing fasteners indicated generally at **318**.

[0069] Bottom plate sections **312** and **313** are horizontally spaced apart to provide a track path **320** into which enter trolleys being moved into switch assembly **50** along track section

26 in a forward or wall extending direction. Plate sections **312** and **314**, and plate sections **313** and **315**, are horizontally spaced apart to provide track paths **321** and **322**, respectively, that are in communication with track path **320** and that have different radiuses of curvature similar to the track paths of switch **70**. Plate sections **314** and **315** are horizontally spaced apart to provide a linear track path **323** in communication and aligned with track path **320**. Track paths **321**, **322** and **323** feed the trolleys moving therealong into the track paths of track sections **27**, **28** and **29**, respectively.

[0070] Guides used to selectively route trolleys passing along track path **320** into one of track path **321**, **322** or **323** include an arrangement of guide plates fixedly mounted to the underside of top plate **310**. In order to ensure engagement with the upstanding diverter blades of both. the lead trolleys and the trailing trolleys, each guide plate on switch assembly **50** is sufficiently tall so as to project down from the top plate to which it is attached to a height slightly below the tops of the shorter upstanding blades of the side diverter elements of the trailing trolleys. Plates of this standard height also naturally project below the tops of taller, upstanding blades of the side diverter elements of the lead trolleys.

[0071] Guide plate **325** serves to route trolleys moving along track path **320** into track path **321** in the process of forming a wall along track segment **27**. Arcuate guide plate **325** is structured such that diverter blade **125** of trolley **100**, and diverter blade **139** of trolley **130** slide along the laterally outer face of guide plate **325** to route trolleys **100** and **130** into track path **321**. Straight guide plates **326** and **327** define a channel **328** through which slide diverter. blade **158** of trolley **150** and diverter blade **166** of trolley **160**. Guide plates **326** and **327** are structured to prevent trolleys **150** and **160** from entering track path **321** as the trolleys move forward in a wall extending direction along track path **320**. Guide plate **330**, which is aligned with guide plate **327**, functions to prevent trolleys **150** and **160** from straying into track path **322**, and thereby direct such trolleys into track path **323** by the engagement of diverter blades **158** and **166** against the laterally outward face of guide plate **330**. Straight guide plate **332** and, guide plate **327** together define a channel **333** through which slide diverter blade **177** of trolley **170** and diverter blade **187** of trolley **180**. Guide plates **327** and

332 prevent trolleys **170** and **180** from entering track path **321** as the trolleys move forward in a wall extending direction along track path **320**. Guide plate **335** is aligned with guide plate **332** and functions to prevent trolleys **170** and **180** from straying into track path **322**, and thereby direct such trolleys into track path **323**, by the engagement of diverter blades **177** and **187** against the laterally outward face of guide plate **335**. In a similar fashion, guide plates **340**, **342**, **344**, and **347** restrict access to track path **322** and track section **28**.

[0072] With reference now to **Figs. 24** and **25**, the switch assembly **60** that during wall extension cooperates with the upstanding blades of the side diverter elements of the trolleys to route the trolleys to their proper track sections **30-32** is shown in top view and rearview, respectively. Except for its guide plate design, switch assembly **60** is constructed and mounted in a similar fashion to switch assembly **50** and includes top plate **370**, bottom plate sections **372**, **373**, **374** and **375**, and spacing fasteners **378**.

[0073] Bottom plate sections **374** and **375** are spaced to provide track path **380**. Plate sections **372** and **374**, and plate sections **373** and **375**, are horizontally spaced apart to provide track paths **381** and **382**, respectively, with radiuses of curvature similar to the track paths of switch **50**. Plate sections **372** and **373** are spaced to provide a linear track path **383** in line with track path **380**. Track paths **380**, **381**, **382** and **383** are aligned with the track paths of track sections **29**, **30**, **31** and **32**, respectively.

[0074] Guides used to selectively route trolleys passing along track path **380** into one of track path **381**, **382** or **383** include guide plates fixedly mounted to the underside of top plate **370**. The guide plates, although shown in **Fig. 25** as having uniform heights, may be of different heights as long as each is sufficiently tall to engage the upstanding diverter blades of both the passing lead trolleys and the trailing trolleys. Arcuate guide plate **390** is structured such that diverter blade **158** of trolley **150**, and diverter blade **166** of trolley **160**, slide along the laterally outer face of guide plate **390** to route trolleys **150** and **160** moving along track path **380** into track path **381** in the process of forming a wall along track segment **30**. Straight guide plates **392** and **394**, together with a segment of guide plate **390**, define a

channel **396** through which slides diverter blade **177** of trolley **170** and diverter blade **187** of trolley **180**. Guide plates **392** and **394** prevent trolleys **170** and **180** from entering track path **381** as the trolleys move forward in a wall extending direction along track path **380**. Guide plate **398** is aligned with guide plate **392** and functions to prevent trolleys **170** and **180** from straying into track path **382**, and thereby directs such trolleys into track path **383**, by the engagement of diverter blades **192** and **186** against the laterally outward face of guide plate **398**. In a similar fashion, guide plates **400**, **402**, and **404** restrict access to track path **382** and track section **31**.

[0075] The automatic track switching system of the present invention will be further understood in view of the following description of its operation. When the panels are in the stacked arrangement shown in **Fig. 2**, to compartmentalize room **20** the panels are first removed from housing **24** manually by a user who subsequently pushes or pulls the panel along the various track sections to a wall-forming position. In particular, when a panel of the type **22a** is moved from its stacked arrangement, the engagement of its trolleys with the switch assemblies **70** and **80** causes panel **22a** to be routed into track section **26**. Upon reaching switch assembly **50**, the above-described engagement of the guide plates mounted on the switch assembly with the upstanding blades of the side diverter elements of its trolleys cause panel **22a** to pass through switch assembly **50** into track segment **29**. When panel **22a** reaches switch assembly **60**, the engagement of the guide plates of the switch assembly with the upstanding blades of the side diverter elements of the trolleys automatically switches panel **22a** into the track path which leads to track section **30**.

[0076] Panels of the type **22c** are routed via switch assemblies **70** and **80** into track section **26**, and are automatically routed by switch assembly **50** into track section **27**. Panels of the type **22e** are routed by switch assemblies **70** and **80** into track section **26**, and, depending on the order in which they are moved from housing **24**, such panels are aligned along track, segments **32**, **29** and **26**.

[0077] The process of moving the panels back to a stacked arrangement is performed in generally the reverse order of the wall-forming process. As the panels traveling along track section **26** are moved rearward, the trailing trolleys enter the switch assembly **70**. Because the shorter upstanding pins of the side diverter elements of the trailing trolleys do not vertically extend upward to engage the guide plates of assembly **70**, the trailing trolleys are not affected by such guide plates. However, the center diverter disposed at the top of each trailing trolley engages the innermost guides **292** and **297**, thereby routing the trailing trolleys into track segment **72** and then ultimately to switch assembly **80**. As the panels continue to move rearward, the guide plates of switch assembly **80** engage the upstanding pins of the side diverter elements of the trailing trolleys to route the trailing trolleys into the proper track section for stacking, and the guide plates of switch assembly **70** engage the upstanding pins of the side diverter elements of the lead trolleys to route the lead trolleys into the proper track section for stacking.

[0078] By utilizing diverter elements on the trolleys which are provided at different lateral spacings relative to the trolleys; it is possible to provide automatic track switching systems adaptable for use with a great variety of types of wall arrangements. Although trolleys with side diverter elements with three lateral pin positionings are shown, systems with fewer or possibly even greater lateral positionings are within the scope of the present invention.

[0079] While this invention has been shown and described as having multiple designs, the present invention may be further modified within the spirit an scope of this disclosure. For instance, although the lead and trailing trolley pairs have been described as having side diverter elements at the same lateral positioning, the invention contemplates combinations of lead and trailing trolley pairs wherein the side diverters are positioned at different lateral displacements from the trolley centerlines.

[0080] While the invention has been illustrated and described in detail in the drawings and foregoing description, the same is to be considered as illustrative and not restrictive in character. It should be understood that only the preferred embodiments have been shown and

described and that all changes and modifications that come within the spirit of the invention are desired to be protected.